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THE MIDDLE AGES IN THE LINEAGE OF ENGLISH POETRY

BY

SIR ISRAEL GOLLANCZ, LITT.D., F.B.A.

WITH THE AUTHOR'S COMPLIMENTS

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F. M.,

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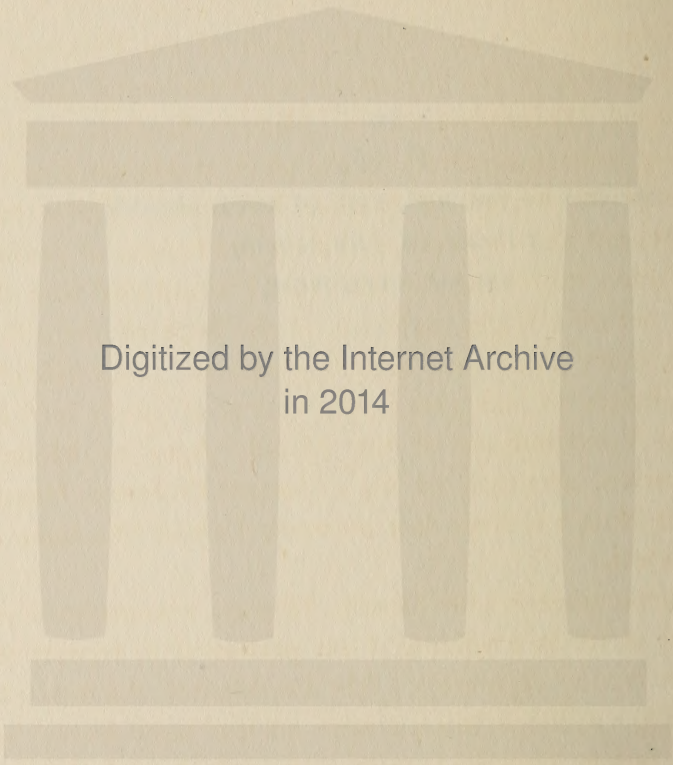
VOTARY OF THE MUSES,

IN ALL AFFECTION;

I. G.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PREFACE

On February 6, 1920, as President of the Philological Society I took as the subject of my Presidential Address the recent disparagement of Middle English studies, dwelling more particularly on the place of Middle English poetry in the lineage of English literature. Those who were present on that occasion did me the honour of passing a resolution expressing the wish that I would deal with the theme before a larger audience, in the hope of dispelling certain views which were becoming current. Accordingly, when invited to take part in the course of public lectures on the Contributions of the Middle Ages to Modern Civilization, arranged by my colleague Professor Hearnshaw at King's College last autumn, I chose this again as my subject.

By arrangement with Messrs. Harrap, who are publishing the series as a volume, I am permitted to reprint the present lecture separately. My Presidential Address and the King's College lecture were on the same lines; but in the former an introductory section dealt with the pre-eminent services to English scholarship, for more than half a century, of the Philological Society and its offshoot, the Early English Text Society, not only in elucidating the history of the English Language, notably by bringing

into being the New English Dictionary, but also in providing the materials for the right knowledge of the progress of English Literature.

The lecture as printed is based on a verbatim report.

I. G.

King's College,
London,
May, 1921

THE MIDDLE AGES IN THE LINEAGE OF ENGLISH POETRY

I.

MY theme is English literature of the Middle Ages, and some few salient features in its relation to the more modern periods. There is a growing tendency at present to disparage the literature of the Middle Ages.[1] Indeed, the farther off these Middle Ages happen to be, the more severe is the disparagement. To my mind, the perspective of English literature is often altogether distorted, because the relationship of Early English to later literature, and the component elements of the literature of the Middle Ages, are not clearly understood. One of the main causes of this attitude of some critics and historians is due to the fact that the literature of England goes back to a far-off age, long before the Norman Conquest, and that in consequence its language is so archaic that it cannot be readily understood without careful study.

Chaucer's spelling may be bad enough, yet he can be read without much difficulty; but in the case of Chaucer's predecessors by some five or six hundred years it is not merely a matter of spelling—the language itself seems utterly different, with its strange vocabulary, syntax, and

[1] *Cp.* Sir A. Quiller-Couch, "The Lineage of English Literature" and other chapters, in *Studies in Literature*. First and Second Series. Cambridge University Press.

grammar. I fear that one has often to fight against what is tantamount to a plea for ignorance. Because the ancient literature of England can be traced so far back, and because its language is so archaic as to necessitate serious study, it is dismissed as unworthy of consideration. The main object of my observations will be to dispel, if possible, some of these errors in respect of the place of older English literature, and of poetry in particular, in the lineage of our literature from the period of Chaucer to more modern times.

The term 'Middle Ages' is vague indeed. Writers in the eighteenth century would comprehensively describe previous ages, including even some part of the Elizabethan age, by the convenient epithet 'Gothic'—by which term was meant what was opposed to classical, what was rugged, what was well-nigh barbarous. The thirteenth and fourteenth centuries are generally called up to mind when one speaks of the Middle Ages with reference to English literature; but there were the earlier Middle Ages, the so-called Dark Ages, centuries before the Norman Conquest, a period of no little interest for students of English literature. It is this Old English period which is more particularly singled out for the disparagement to which I have referred. Yet the extant remains of this literature from the seventh to the eleventh century are striking manifestations of the genius of Old England in its strength and its simplicity, before the later alien elements had become infused. We are able to judge therefrom the spirit of that old English folk to whom are due not only the basic elements of English speech, but also the foundations of English institutional life, and much that is most characteristic in English ideals.

What do we discover from a rapid survey of this literature

of the early Middle Ages? We are not confronted with the rude beginnings, the rough scaffolding, on which a noble structure was to be built up. We see rather a finished effort of a special type, the culmination of a long previous period of development, on special lines and with marked characteristics. In the productions of the Anglian poets of the eighth century we have a poetry remarkable for a certain stateliness, from which is absent what is uncouth or rudimentary. It is marked, too, by a high seriousness, as though the poets felt that the purpose of their art was to edify and to instruct. Indeed, this hall-mark of earnestness often testifies to something deeper in spirit than can find expression in form. In the heroic poetry of this age the minstrel held up a mirror of heroic life, showing how a young warrior should behave, how he should comport himself, how he should regard life as of no value when honour was at stake. The burden of *Beowulf* is that "death is better than a life of reproach." It is not only in the Christian poetry of the Anglo-Saxons that we find the fine note of seriousness. True, *Beowulf*, when compared with the *Odyssey*, may easily invite disparagement, but it is surely a strange attitude for those who deal with the history of English literature to argue that because the Teutonic heroic poem is altogether inferior to the Greek epic, it is therefore of no value whatsoever in the pedigree of English poetry. Æsthetic consideration is one thing; the right appraising of a document in genealogy is apart from æsthetic consideration. At all events, the business of the critic is to attempt to understand why and in what respects the Teutonic genius differs from the more glorious genius of Greece. If the search is for enchantment, one must look elsewhere than among the remains of English poetry of pre-Conquest times. In tone

and spirit this poetry is severely epic. It calls for no apology, but it demands study. From the seventh to the early part of the ninth century, until under King Alfred the centre of literary activity passed from Anglia to Wessex, Anglian poets produced work well worthy of the recognition that should be given to some notable achievement preserved miraculously from ancient days to our own time.

II.

Anglo-Saxon civilisation was not suddenly put an end to by the Norman Conquest, though by that time it had come to its full development, and was passing into its decline. It is true that toward the end of that period the English muse had become anæmic and weak; she needed new strength, new forces of vitality.

Let us turn to the fourteenth century. During the second half of the century the arresting figure of Chaucer claims our first attention. Born in London, associated from his youth with the brilliant court of Edward III and the higher social life of his time, Chaucer was the disciple of the gracious poets of France. Finding nothing to quicken his poetic sense in contemporary or earlier English poetry, he turned to France and set himself the congenial task of bringing into native English the measures, the inspiration, the charm and delicacy of the French poets, with their joyance, picturesqueness, and delight in dreams of beauty. The magic of the *Romaunt of the Rose*, and of the school of poets under the spell of that Poets' Bible of the Middle Ages, must have won his heart in his boyhood. When he had tarried long enough in this Temple of Glass, he turned elsewhere, and dwelt with the greater intellectual forces of Italy. Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, through

Chaucer, became part of English literary tradition. Having learnt what he could from these mighty patriarchs of Humanism, Chaucer discovered the full strength of his own genius as the inimitable story-teller in verse. His pre-eminence as poet was acclaimed in his own time, and through the centuries to our own day he has stood forth with undiminished fame.

From the historical point of view, as Tennyson well put it, Chaucer "preluded . . . the spacious days of great Elizabeth." He is the forward link in the lineage of English literature. In the first place, he was the poet of London, the centre of the social life of his time—the poet of the East Midland district of England. His greatness obscured the position of those of his contemporaries who belonged to more provincial parts of England, and who could not escape the oblivion that overtakes mere local fame. The place of these poets in the perspective of English literature it is my purpose to emphasise.

Along the Welsh Marches, up to Lancashire and Westmorland, as in many other districts of England, there lived those who held strongly to the older traditions of the English race. There were families in these regions who treasured their memories from ancient times, and who prided themselves on having lived in these parts long before the coming of William the Conqueror. Among these the English element predominated, even as the Norman among those of higher social life in London and the great social centres near. While Chaucer was singing his delightful ballades, charming the ears of courtiers and ladies by his French love-songs in English verse, there was a voice to be heard other than that of "the new gladness of a great people, which utters itself in the verse of Geoffrey Chaucer." It was a

sterner voice, that disdained the gauds of rhyme and the harmonies of the French school of poetry. For let us think of the real conditions of the time. At the court there was the pomp, extravagance, and display of chivalry, the luxury and splendour of a revived Camelot. The glamour was truly great. But between Crécy and Poitiers there was dire national tribulation. There were grave economic and social problems, due partly to the Black Death, which in 1349 carried off large parts of the population, and also to the continuous wars with France. The splendours of the Order of the Garter proved no antidote to these ills. The condition of the country was bad; there was corruption in Church and State. Then it was that a stern voice arose in the West Midlands, the voice of Langland, like that of some Hebrew prophet-poet of old, telling the people, in language that went readily home, in the rhymeless alliterative metre of the old days before the Conquest, the stern truth that their sufferings were due to national shortcomings, and that a guide should be found to lead them to the shrine of Truth. Perchance from among the lowly, the humble tillers of the soil, such a true leader might be found. This was the purpose of *The Vision of Piers Plowman*. By the intensity of its lesson, the Vision seems to have spread far and wide throughout the land; Langland appears to be the only poet of the West Midland school who gained recognition as a national, and not merely local, poet. The school of West Midland alliterative poets, of whom there were many, though hardly a name other than Langland's has come down to us, holds a distinctive place in the lineage of English literature. These poets, in respect of metre, manner, and spirit, for the most part harked back to the time before the Conquest. I do not mean to say for a

moment that they were acquainted with the writings of Cædmon or Cynewulf, or any pre-Conquest literature; yet they were something more than the spiritual heirs of the older English poets. In some way or other—the problem is a difficult one—the Old English alliterative metre lived on during the centuries that followed the Norman Conquest, and suddenly, about the middle of the fourteenth century, to judge from extant poetry, there was a great revival of this archaic form of poetry. Even where these poets chose their matter from France or from Latin sources, the spirit of the handling is characteristic and altogether differentiated from the Chaucerian method. All the West Midland poets may not have the technical skill and finish attained by the poet of *Cleanness* and *Patience*, but where the treatment shows a weaker hand, the purpose is none the less marked, namely, that the lesson is the first consideration, transcending all effort in search of the artistic and æsthetic. In common with Langland, the whole school of West Midland poets represents the backward link in the genealogy of English poetry, that is, they link the age of Chaucer, in spirit as well as in form, to the far-off days before the Conquest.

Nor was the alliterative revival, as we shall see, a mere barren antiquarian freak. The voice of William Langland was not a passing voice; it re-echoed down the ages. *The Vision of Piers Plowman* cannot with any appreciation of the facts be regarded as "the last dying spasm" of Anglo-Saxon literature, as Sir A. Quiller-Couch, University Professor of English Literature at Cambridge, futilely, in my opinion, attempts to demonstrate, in his zeal to maintain the worthlessness of Middle English poetry, save that of Chaucer, in the lineage of English

literature. "I shall attempt to convince you," he states, "that Chaucer did not inherit any secret from Cædmon or Cynewulf." As though, forsooth, it were necessary, at this time of day, to prove what no sane person would for a moment contest! The fundamental error in all these discussions seems to be a failure to understand that there were these two schools of poetry, the Chaucerian and the West Midland, representing two great voices in the harmonies of English poetry, the one with its quest for beauty and melody, and the other, by utterance more homely and direct, seeking primarily to enforce the lesson. In their attitude toward Nature the two schools may well be contrasted, the Chaucerian with its conventional bright May mornings and landscapes of joyance, the West Midland poets with their interpretation of Nature in her more rugged moods, with their fondness for storms and tempests and lowering clouds. Even in Chaucer's own time one poet at least sought to harmonise the two voices. The poet of *Pearl* was a West Midland poet who sought to blend the spirit of exalted religious aspiration with the beauty, harmony, and picturesqueness of the Romance poets. With one hand, as it were, toward Langland, and one toward Chaucer, he, in a sense, more truly than Chaucer, is the herald of the Elizabethan poets; certainly so, if Spenser is to be regarded as the Elizabethan poet *par excellence*. As the author of *Gawain and the Green Knight*, this West Midland poet is the prophet of *The Faerie Queene*, and stands on the very threshold of modern English poetry, in the fullest sense of the term. If Chaucer was "the father of English poetry," and the old title may well remain, let us at all events understand the place of his contemporaries in the pedigree of his descendants.

III.

Let us come to the Elizabethan Age. The Elizabethan Age may roughly be described as the meeting-point of the Ages of the world. We pass from the Middle Ages to what we call the modern time. True, the Middle Ages were not far off, and their glamour was still a potent source of inspiration. Antiquity had been rediscovered—the great literatures of Judæa, Greece, and Rome. The Revival of Learning was not only the revived interest in classical antiquity; the Bible became an open book, and the Reformation in England, as elsewhere, was one manifestation of this aspect of the Renaissance. It is of Edmund Spenser that one thinks as the poet of the Elizabethan Age in spirit, in form, and in apparel ; and the secret of Spenser's poetry, I am inclined to hold, may perhaps best be understood with reference to the theory I am propounding. In text-books on Spenser critics glibly enumerate the poet's limitations, as well as the marks of his greatness, instead of endeavouring to understand some of their difficulties in dealing with a poet who is perhaps the truest representative of the greatest age of English poetry. There can be little doubt that his latent poetic genius was stirred into life by turning over the pages of a black-letter folio of Chaucer, and that instinctively the London schoolboy, for Spenser was a poet while still at school, fell under the spell of the older poet, and learned from him something of the true beauty of form and harmony. And yet, great as was the disciple's debt to his master, would it be possible to find two geniuses more utterly different in spirit and character than the poet of *Troilus and Criseyde* and the poet of *The Faerie Queene*, of whom Milton said he was " a greater

teacher than Aquinas"? One thinks of the smile that would have played across the features of Chaucer, had some one hinted to him that he was primarily a great teacher, or had any qualifications or aspirations for that office. But with Spenser it was otherwise; and the secret of Spenser is this, that whereas as regards beauty of form and the technical art of poetry he was truly the disciple of Chaucer, in spirit he belonged rather to the West Midland poets, the school of Langland. This explains why it is that, although he gives us creations steeped in beauty, sparkling with light, dream pictures, armour of richest damascene, his object is to protect and save and exalt the human soul. You may well say that Spenser, as Chaucer, was a Londoner. What had he in common with the old poets of the West Midlands, with the spirit of Langland, even though he may have read a black-letter edition of *The Vision of Piers Plowman*? My answer might be that the spirit of a work is a thing apart from its immediate environment. But one need not dismiss the question so lightly. It is a fact that the family to which Spenser and all his forbears belonged lived in Lancashire; and this is significant as regards those marked elements in the spirit of his poetry which link him with the West Midland school. In this Elizabethan poet *par excellence* there lived on, spiritually, much that differentiates him from Chaucer and the Chaucerians, even as an analysis of his archaic English reveals a most significant attempt to blend words due to his reading of Chaucer with native mother-words belonging to the family Lancashire home. To illustrate some of these dialect words, one must turn to the alliterative poems written by Chaucer's contemporaries of the West. *Gawain and the Green Knight*, as I have already suggested,

might well have stood as a canto of *The Faerie Queene*, and indeed the Gawain legend has its analogues there. In beauty, in technical skill, and in picturesqueness that fourteenth-century poet is the counterpart of Spenser, though the poet of the Renaissance had richer stores of knowledge to draw on. Yet, steeped as Spenser was in all the New Learning, in the glory of the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, and in the inspiration of Neoplatonism, it is remarkable that his close kinship with the fourteenth-century poet of the alliterative revival is so unmistakable. Spenser, indeed, blended successfully, even as the poet of *Pearl* attempted to blend, the two main voices in the great harmony of English song. It is not without significance that he himself, when first he came before the world as the new poet, with due humility indicated his literary progenitors:

> "Dare not to match thy pype with Tityrus hys style,
> Nor with the Pilgrim that the Ploughman playde awhyle;
> But followe them farre off, and their high steppes adore:
> The better please, the worse despise; I aske nomore."

And what of Shakespeare and the Elizabethan drama and their debt to the Middle Ages? The Elizabethan drama perhaps owed its greatest debt to the Middle Ages in being rescued, through the freedom and ease that characterised the earlier drama, from slavish adherence to the conventional classical forms of tragedy and comedy, from the tyranny of Seneca and Plautus and Terence, from the unities of time and place and action. In respect of matter, it might be an easy thing to point to the mediæval sources of Shakespeare and the Elizabethan drama. The matter of Britain and France, mediæval romances and tales, chronicles, ballads, and folklore all contributed materials on which the dramatists worked. As regards the chief

instrument of expression, blank verse, which was originally a purely academic importation from Italy, it became the plastic instrument able to bear the impress of varied human emotions, only when it had become, as it were, thoroughly Teutonised. Shakespeare, and to some extent Marlowe before him, unconsciously rediscovered that freedom which characterised the Old English metre, and imposed it on this alien blank verse. Of course, in reality it was the English spirit resisting slavery to an academic convention, and naturalising an alien metre. Yet whatever one may adduce tending to link Shakespeare's work to the Middle Ages, and although he may wear the apparelling of his own age, his powers transcend altogether the stuff on which his genius worked. And so it is that I have chosen Spenser, rather than Shakespeare, to illustrate the underlying purpose of my discourse. Much as I would wish to dwell on the varied forms of poetry, the sonnet, the lyrical measures, complaints, and other forms of Elizabethan poetry derived from earlier ages, as these do not help forward my main contention, I pass them by with this brief reference.

Taken comprehensively, as Taine well put it, the Renaissance in England was the renaissance of the Saxon genius. From this point of view it is significant that Shakespeare's greatest achievement, *Hamlet*, is the presentment of a typically northern hero, the embodiment of the northern character:

"Dark and true and tender is the North."

IV.

In the period known as the Romantic Revival, antiquarianism holds almost as great a place as the 'return to nature.' The instinctive protest against 'good sense'

led to the groping for far-off things and for the truer understanding of nature apart from convention. The various elements of mediævalism that were contributory sources of inspiration to the poets of the period of the Romantic Revival have been ably dealt with by more than one historian of English literature. Percy's *Reliques*, and Macpherson's *Ossian*, the Runic poetry that inspired Gray, Chatterton's infatuation, all represent phases in the effort to recapture the matter, spirit, and form of far-off days. Very often that return to the past meant a return to the Elizabethans, and to Spenser in particular, and through Spenser men unwittingly got much of the spirit of the Middle Ages. Then came Coleridge and Wordsworth, and their efforts to regain something that had been lost to English poetry. *The Ancient Mariner* and *Christabel* are the manifestations of the effort of the new poetry in its adventures in the eerie realms of mediæval lore. But for my purpose, as enforcing my theme, I would for the moment rather dwell on Wordsworth's poetry, in which there is so little of direct inspiration from mediævalism. There is no wild Gothic terror and wonderment that one can point to as linking him with mediæval machinery. Yet in his very canons of poetic diction, his early contemning of artifice, his exaltation of spirit, aiming seriously at the truth of things, his placing of the lesson over and above the form, his treatment of Nature especially in her sterner moods, his attitude as prophet-poet dealing with the realities of his time, the very limitations noted in him as poet, help to remind one that we are not here dealing with a poet of London, but one bred among the solitary cliffs, among the

> "Presences of Nature in the sky
> And on the earth,"

among the " visions of the hills, and souls of lonely places." It is of no small interest that the chief of the Lake Poets is a West Midland poet, and belongs to about the same district as that assigned to the poet of *Pearl* and of *Gawain and the Green Knight.*

Mediæval beauty revealed itself truly through Keats, who through Spenser passed on to Chaucer, and touched with his own genius mediævalism, even as he transformed the myths of Hellas. Keats entered into the land of faery, his poetic soul untouched by mere antiquarianism, and for sheer inimitable mediæval glamour nothing can exceed his transmuting touch:

" I met a lady in the meads
Full beautiful, a faery's child ;
Her hair was long, her foot was light,
And her eyes were wild.

" I set her on my pacing steed,
And nothing else saw all day long ;
For sideways would she lean, and sing
A faery's song."

"The Wizard of the North," on whom the spell of mediævalism worked so mightily, restored with marvellous precision the panorama of mediæval life. It is not here a matter of the poet's own spiritual outlook. Yet one may recapture much of the matter of mediævalism without being affected by its spirit.

The theme of King Arthur is perhaps of all others the most abiding and inspiring in English literature; but the artistic beauty, delicacy, and charm of Tennyson's *Idylls* are a long way off from any antiquarian revival. He feels himself inheritor of the great mediæval theme,

and applies thereto his own ideals and workmanship. Through Keats, back through the ages to Chaucer, Tennyson links himself to those poets who gave the first place in the art of poetry to the quest for the beautiful in harmony, diction, and picturesqueness—a contrast to his contemporary Browning, whose alleged obscurity and neglect of *finesse* remind one of the other type of the poetic mind, caring more for the message than the form.

V.

The Pre-Raphaelite movement manifested itself in literature as well as in art. Rossetti, if not Holman Hunt, belongs to, and was not merely associated with, English literature. But one of the brotherhood, William Morris, represents better than anyone of the age that has passed some of the main aspects of the subject here dealt with. In memorable lines addressed to Chaucer he hailed that poet as not "the idle singer of an empty day," a refrain which humbly he applied to himself. He, the poet of "art for art's sake," found his own heart near to Chaucer, "great of heart and tongue"; and in his first published book, *The Defence of Guenevere*, we find him stretching out his arms to capture the fancies of mediæval romance and repicturing them with new artistic charms. The spirit of Chaucer is on him in this volume, which was the earnest of even greater achievement. That spell still held him as the poet of *The Life and Death of Jason* and *The Earthly Paradise*. Then came upon him the deeper spirit that set him pondering on social problems, and "the idle singer of an empty day" became the protagonist of the cause of social reform and the dignity of work. Another spell possessed him, linking him to the spirit of Langland, or,

at all events, of Langland's contemporary, John Ball, with his famous text:

> "When Adam dalf, and Eve span,
> Who was thanne a gentilman?"

He brought into English literature the riches, not only of mediæval Romantic literature, but also of the Sagas and Eddas of old Scandinavia. As artist he had kinship with Chaucer; but there co-existed in his being that other spirit of the literature of Chaucer's time represented by his great contemporary, the author of *The Vision of Piers Plowman*. Translator of the *Odyssey* and the *Æneid*, he yet did not disdain to touch with his genius even the Old English heroic poem of *Beowulf*. The significance of William Morris in the lineage of English poetry will perhaps in the days to come be adequately understood.

As for the future, whatever may be the fortunes of English poetry, whatever experiments may be made by new schools of poets, whatever new ideas may be brought into English literature, inspiration will still come from the bygone ages, however the matter be treated. That inspiration will be heard in varied voices and in many strains. The quest for the beautiful will find expression in richest harmonies, and the teaching of the lesson will be enforced by prophet-poets. As in the past, so in the future there will be many mansions in the great house of English Poetry, and one at least there will always be, richly storied from the realms of Mediæval Romance, with

> "Magic casements, opening on the foam
> Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn."

Pamph
LE.H
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Author Gollancz, (Sir) Israel

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